

Why the German elections matter to the rest of the world

(CNN) We've had our fair share of dramatic elections recently – the UK, France, the US. And let's not forget Brexit. The German election on September 24 may be generating fewer headlines, but it's no less important.

Here's why you should pay attention.

Why should you care?

If you're in the US:

Germany is one of America's staunchest allies. But German Chancellor Angela Merkel is NOT a fan of US President Donald Trump (remember the tense no-handshake during her White House visit?). And it seems like her main challenger, Martin Schulz, likes Trump even less, and he's not shy about ripping into the American President. So it seems, no matter who wins this election, US-German relations are likely to be strained.

If you're in Europe:

To borrow a phrase, Germany's the big man on campus. It has the biggest and strongest economy in the European Union. It's widely seen, along with France, as a driver of EU policy and a powerful player in the Brexit negotiations. Speaking of which, both Merkel and Schulz (a former EU President) seem inclined to take more of a hard line with the UK over its impending exit from the trade bloc.

If you're anywhere else:

Observers of politics everywhere want to see if populist passions will reignite. They burned bright last year in the Brexit vote and the US presidential election, but have dimmed in 2017 with the loss of far-right candidates in France and the Netherlands.

The parties led by Merkel or Schulz aren't populist movements by any stretch, but concerns over refugees and security could help propel the far-right AfD (Alternative for Germany) into parliament for the first time. And just like in France's presidential election earlier this year, anyone in a war-torn country in the Mideast or Africa looking to Germany as a place of refuge might wonder what kind of welcome they'll get there in the future.

How does the work?

Germans will be voting to fill seats in the Bundestag, the country's 598-seat parliament. Whichever party wins the most seats will try to form a coalition government, and the leader of that party will then become chancellor (equivalent to the US President).

OK, now stay with us, because from here it gets really complicated.

German voters will cast two votes on election day.

On the first vote they will choose from a list of local candidates to represent their district. The candidate who gets the most votes in each district wins a seat in parliament. Half of the Bundestag's seats (299) are decided this way.

For their second vote, they choose from a list of the political parties. The remaining 299 seats are then distributed among the parties based on the percentage of votes received nationwide. Only parties that get more than 5% of the vote nationally can send representatives to the parliament.

What's the point of this convoluted system? It allows voters to split their vote between parties. They can vote for a local candidate from one party and cast their second vote for a different party.

Merkel's party, the center-right Christian Democratic Union, and its sister party the Christian Social Union, currently have 309 seats in the Bundestag. They've spent the past four years in coalition with the center-left Social Democratic party, which has 193 seats.

Who could be chancellor?

Angela Merkel

Who she is: Merkel, of course, is the current chancellor of Germany, an office she's held since 2005. She's the country's first female leader, and she's pretty popular right now (her approval rating stands at about 59% in one recent poll). If the 62-year-old Merkel wins, it'll be her fourth term in the post. And if she were to serve a full term, she would tie with Helmut Kohl as Germany's longest serving post-war chancellor (16 years). In her time in office, there have been three US presidents, four UK prime ministers and four French presidents. For those who aren't fans of current US President Donald Trump, she's now thought to be the

most powerful person in the world.

What she wants: Merkel has a fairly liberal policy on refugees. She's a big fan of the global economy. She wants to give Germans tax cuts (especially young families). She wants to lower unemployment, which would be a neat trick, since unemployment in the booming German economy is already at or near record lows. She also wants to hire thousands of new police officers at both the state and federal level.

Fun fact: She worked as a physicist before getting into politics.

Telling quote: "The times when we could completely rely on others are, to an extent, over." (The "others" Merkel is referring to is the United States.)

Martin Schulz

Who he is: Schulz, 61, is a former president of the European Union (and, surprise, no fan of Brexit), and he's relatively new to leadership in the center-left Social Democratic party. He was picked to lead his party back in January. He was elected mayor of his hometown of Wurselen in 1987 at age 31, but he's spent more of his political life dealing with EU matters in Brussels than he has holding office in Germany.

What he wants: Schulz, dubbed by some as the German Bernie Sanders, wants to raise taxes on the rich and give tax relief to middle income earners. He wants Germany to use some of its budget surplus for investments in infrastructure and to help boost the EU. He wants the US to get its nukes out of Germany.

Fun fact: He dreamed of becoming a professional soccer player (a serious knee injury shattered that dream), and he once owned a bookstore.

Telling quote: "You have the choice between a chancellor who avoids every debate about the future and somebody who tells you what he wants."

What are the big issues?

Immigration:

This is the big one. It's been the top concern of German voters since 2015, when over one million migrants and refugees arrived. Merkel's popularity took a drubbing during that time, but it's rebounded. That's a shock to many of her critics, including the far-right AfD party, which has capitalized on concern among

some Germans by promising to clamp down on immigration. Issues such as family reunification, deportations and integration as well as border controls and a possible cap on asylum seekers (both Merkel and Schulz are against that) continue to make headlines.

Climate change:

Environmental issues always play a big role in German elections, but with Donald Trump pulling the US out of the Paris agreement, the topic is an especially hot one this time around. And despite Merkel's impassioned fight for the environment, Germany's greenhouse gas emissions haven't dropped much for close to a decade.

Social inequality:

Germany is a prosperous country with a good welfare system, but it still has some issues. Yes, unemployment hit its lowest point since reunification this year, but the poverty rate is way up too. In fact, the poverty rate is breaking new records in Germany, even as GDP continues to grow. Schulz has put inequality at the center of his campaign.

Security and terrorism:

Germany's suffered a number of terror attacks the past couple of years — including a horrific truck attack on a Christmas market in Berlin that killed 12 people back in December — so security remains another high-ranking concern. Both Merkel and Schulz have promised to strengthen Germany's security forces and hire more police.

So who's going to win?

Merkel and her party seem poised to cruise to victory. Her Christian Democrats are consistently polling at 35 to 40%, while Schulz's Social Democrats are at 20 to 25%. Germans seem to prefer the stability that Merkel's run as chancellor has provided — especially with the rise of populist movements in other European countries and the increase in terrorism incidents on the continent. As one political commentator put it, Germans aren't looking for a political revolution, so they probably won't take the risk.

What happens afterward?

There's the fun and games of coalition building. You see, to form a government a

political party has to win more than 50% of the seats in parliament. This is highly unlikely, since there are 42 parties (42!) fielding candidates in this election. So the party that ends up with the most seats (and that, most likely, will be Merkel's Christian Democratic Union) will negotiate with others to form the government. Those negotiations start on September 25.

Source: <http://www.cnn.com/2017/08/31/europe/german-election-guide-trnd/index.html>

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